ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 15

BOSTON GLOBE
19 December 1986

The lessons that have been learned from the Iran-contra affair

WILLIAM BEECHER

WASHINGTON – It may be months before the full story of the Iran arms debacle has been pieced together, but already certain lessons have been learned.

Lesson No. 1: The staff of the National Security Council is not meant or geared to be running operations out of the basement of the White House. It lacks the judgment, expertise, staff backup, and checks and balances that exist in Cabinet agencies.

There is also the danger of aggressive young staffers indiscriminately phoning generals, ambassadors and CIA officials, invoking the name of the president, and directing actions outside normal channels.

The NSC staff, however, must be sufficiently manned with talented and self-confident specialists to be able to toss position papers back to Cabinet officers for better analyses. It also must ensure that White House requests for options are produced on schedule so the bureaucracy cannot, by heel-dragging, induce indecision and drift.

In a government of competing, often parochial interests, the president should have a White House staff to ensure he gets thoughtful, broad-gauged options and oversight. But it cannot be used as a free-wheelling hit squad for sensitive operations.

Lesson No. 2: The director of Central Intelligence should neither hold Cabinet rank nor be perceived as being primarily a partisan politician.

Intelligence reports and assessments must be as objective as possible. To the extent they're skewed, either to reflect the CIA chief's political prejudices or the president's ideological proclivities, they produce a quicksand foundation for decisions. An example was the assessment before the Bay of Pigs that the Cuban people were ready to rise up against Castro.

A pol who becomes the head of the intelligence community, just as one who takes over as attorney general, raises inevitable questions about politicization of his agency and his advice. Was Ed Meese's counsel about the legality of selling arms to Iran based on a careful, objective reading of the law, or on his feeling that that's what the boss wanted to hear?

Even if Meese's motives were pure, his lifelong association with Ronald Reagan creates suspicions of political taint.

The same holds for William Casey's advice throughout the Iran arms trauma. It would have been a political boon if all the hostages in Lebanon had been freed before the November elections. That may never have entered either Reagan's or Casey's minds; but the fact Casey had managed Reagan's presidential campaign raised such speculation.

By the same token, the purveyor of intelligence should not be seen as having coequal status and a competing policy objective with those of, say, the secretaries of state and defense – if they are to trust his analyses.

Lesson No. 3: Cabinet officers should not be fenced out of sensitive intelligence and thus kept in the dark. Coincident with the Jan. 17 finding to proceed with direct US arms sales, George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger were among those specifically excluded from sensitive intelligence on the subject.

Thus National Security Agency intercepts of phone talks between Iranian, American, Israeli, Canadian and Saudi arms merchants and officials were not to be passed to policy makers at the State Department and the Pentagon.

One result was that Shultz and Weinberger were not privy to information probably possessed by their counterparts in a dozen or more governments, both Western and Soviet-bloc. This at a time Shultz, for instance, was beating on both the Russians and West Europeans to cut off arms supplies to Iran.

Furthermore, had their agencies been informed, it stands to reason someone might have said: "Wait a minute. If 2,000 TOW antitank missiles are provided to Iran, and if they are concentrated effectively at one point on the battlefield, the Iranians might be able to break through Iraqi tanks and split the country in half – possibly causing a military panic and bringing down the government. Is that what you want: an Iranian victory?"

William Beecher is the Globe's chief diplomatic correspondent.